

Councillor briefing: Why tobacco control matters to local government



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Key points

- **Smoking is the leading cause of preventable illness and death in England**, causing [at least 16 different types of cancer](#) and [nearly 75,000](#) deaths each year. No other consumer product kills two thirds of long-term users.
- **Smoking causes almost one [hospital admission](#) every minute** and [over 100 GP appointments](#) every hour. It is also a major drain on economic growth, costing society in England £43.7bn a year through lost productivity and NHS and social care costs. This compares to £6.8bn raised through tobacco taxes.
- **Smoking rates in England have fallen to their lowest ever level of [11.6%](#)**, due to sustained tobacco control efforts. Despite this progress, there are still 6 million UK smokers who are at risk of being left behind – local government has a key role to play in supporting them to quit.
- **The public overwhelmingly [supports](#) action to address smoking.**

1. What elected members can do

Ask your Director of Public Health about the council's tobacco control strategy. Does it include prevalence targets for key populations? Is tobacco a priority in the council's health and wellbeing strategy? Is the strategy informed by ASH's '[10 high impact actions for local authorities and their partners?](#)' or [guidance](#) on the most impactful way to spend the additional DHSC funding for tobacco control.

Support regional tobacco control programmes. Some areas have regional tobacco control programmes that coordinate activity across multiple councils. Find out if your council is part of a regional programme and if they are doing any work that you can support. Regional programmes have played a key role in accelerating declines in smoking prevalence in areas like the North East.

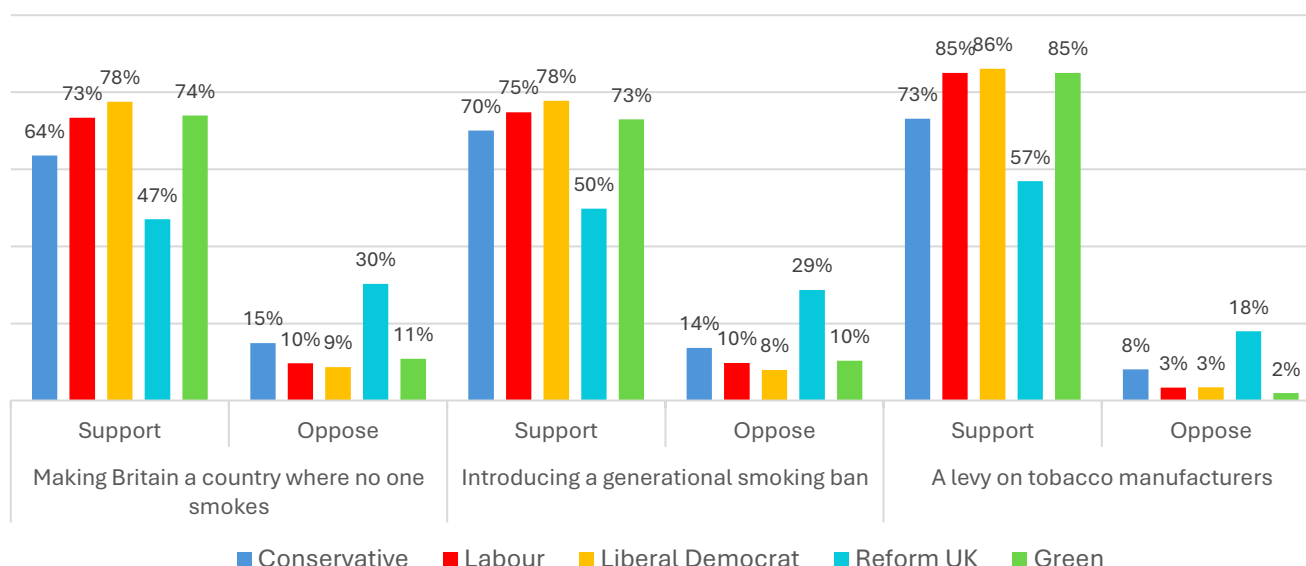
Protect tobacco control activity from the tobacco industry. The UK is a signatory to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) – an international treaty designed to help countries reduce smoking rates. Article 5.3 of the FCTC requires public bodies to protect health policy from tobacco industry influence. Every council should have a strategy for adhering to Article 5.3 and elected members should avoid any interaction with tobacco companies or their affiliates. *For more information, see the [ASH guidance](#) on implementing Article 5.3, [LGA guidance](#) for local government officers and elected representatives, and [national guidance](#) developed by DHSC.*

Support national, regional and local campaigns to end smoking. Councillors are respected public figures who can champion important issues in local and national media. Councillors have played a key role in the campaign for the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, through supporting the Bill in the [media](#), writing to MPs, attending parliamentary events and joining national [calls for action](#). Email admin@smokefreeaction.org.uk to join the ASH Smokefree Councillor Network to receive updates about tobacco control and national campaigning opportunities.

2. Public support for action to reduce smoking

The public overwhelmingly [supports](#) action to reduce smoking rates. Support is strong across voters of all the main political parties. Click [here](#) to view ASH polling on public support for tobacco and vaping policies in every region in England.

% of voters in England that would support/oppose each policy



Note: Respondents who answered “Don’t know” or “Neither support nor oppose” are not included. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 11,103 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 10/02/2025 - 10/03/2025. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all English adults (aged 18+).

3. National commitments on tobacco control

- The Tobacco and Vapes Bill will create a Smokefree Generation by phasing out tobacco sales to anyone born after 2008, saving thousands of lives and easing pressure on public services.
- The Government is providing additional £70 million funding to local stop smoking services and £70 million to the NHS to support more people to quit smoking.
- The Government has committed to halving the gap in life expectancy between the richest and poorest regions in England – smoking is responsible for [half the difference](#) in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest.

4. Smoking and social care

Current and former smokers are much more likely to need care in later life as the result of smoking-related illnesses. Over 1.5 million people require social care because of smoking-related disease, with smokers needing care on average 10 years earlier than never smokers and three times as many weekly care hours.

This costs local authorities over £1 billion in residential and domiciliary care – the total cost to society is £13.9 billion, with most of this made up of informal care by family and friends or unmet care needs.

The ASH [Ready Reckoner tool](#) shows the cost of smoking-related social care in every local authority in England.

5. Tackling the illicit tobacco trade

Illicit tobacco harms communities, funds organised crime and undermines the impact of public health measures by reducing the incentive to quit smoking. Local trading standards officers have a key role to play in tackling the sale of illicit tobacco.

[HMRC](#) data shows that **the number of illicit cigarettes consumed in the UK has declined by almost 90% since 2000-01** – amounting to 13 billion fewer illicit cigarettes consumed per year by 2023-24 – alongside a 68% decline in illicit hand-rolling tobacco (HRT). This has been achieved through a long-running anti-smuggling strategy led by HMRC, Border Force and Trading Standards, alongside measures that have significantly reduced smoking rates – cutting demand for both legal and illegal tobacco. The current [UK illicit tobacco strategy](#) was launched in 2024 and is backed up by £100 million funding over 5 years. This has been supplemented by an additional £10 million a year to support illicit tobacco and vapes enforcement led by Trading Standards.

UK illicit market for cigarettes and HRT (2000-01 – 2023-24)

	2000-01	2023-24
Cigarettes (illicit volume)	15 billion cigarettes	2 billion cigarettes
Cigarettes (illicit market share)	20%	10%
HRT (illicit volume)	5.9 million kg	1.9 million kg
HRT (illicit market share)	61%	24%

Source: HMRC. [Measuring tax gaps tables](#). June 2025

The best way to end the illicit trade in tobacco products for good is to support the 6 million smokers in the UK to quit and create a smokefree generation.

See [here](#) for more information about the UK illicit tobacco trade and how the tobacco industry exploits it to further their lobbying efforts.

6. Smoking and the economy

Smoking costs society in England **£43.7 billion a year** – far more than the £6.8 billion raised through tobacco taxes. This includes **£27.6 billion** in lost economic productivity (early deaths, reduced employment, and lower earnings due to smoking), **£13.9 billion** in social care costs to local authorities, and **£332 million** in fire-related costs.

The ASH [Ready Reckoner tool](#) shows the cost of smoking in every local authority in England.

7. Smoking and health inequalities

Smoking is responsible for half of the difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest in society. Smoking rates among the most disadvantaged groups are significantly higher than the general population – **11.6%** of adults in England smoke, compared to **24.9%** of adults in social housing, **21.7%** of adults in the most deprived decile, and **40.5%** of adults with serious mental illness.

The average person who smokes spends almost £2,500 a year on tobacco – equivalent to 10% of the average disposable income for England. When factoring in smoking costs, 32% of households with a smoker (1.5 million households) fall below the poverty line. Quitting smoking is one of the best things people who smoke can do to boost their income.

The ASH [Inequalities Dashboard](#) shows impact of smoking on health inequalities in every local authority in England.

8. Smoking and the environment

Cigarettes are the most littered item in England, costing councils around [£40 million per year to clean up](#). They leach over 7,000 toxic chemicals into rivers, lakes and soils and pose a hazard to wildlife. Every year the tobacco industry [costs the world](#) more than 8 million human lives, 600 million trees, 200 000 hectares of land, 22 billion tonnes of water and 84 million tonnes of CO₂.